

Counsellor, Conspirator, Polemicist, Historian: John Lesley, Bishop of Ross 1527–96

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Many Scots of doubtful parentage have made their way in the world through their own exertions. For John Lesley, and for others before the Reformation, the path to advancement was through an Arts degree at Aberdeen, Glasgow or St Andrews followed by legal studies on the continent which could fit them for careers in the professions. But not many combined the roles of bishop, lawyer, counsellor, diplomat, polemicist, conspirator and historian. Fewer have attracted so much praise and vituperation as has John Lesley. Andrew Lang condemned him as “a time-serving flatterer”¹ and Burghley as “seedman of all treason”² but he has also been described by Bishop Keith as “this great man, worthy and learned prelate ... of infinite faithfulness, courage and capability”³ and by James Anderson as one of the two outstanding Scots writers of his period.⁴ His books were equally controversial. Although always a practical response to a particular situation, some of them came to have a much wider significance.

Our knowledge of Lesley’s life depends largely on two accounts which he wrote for different purposes and in different circumstances. The first was ostensibly an account of how he had discharged the duties with which his Queen, Mary, had entrusted him as her ambassador to

¹ *The apologie for William Maitland of Lidington*, ed. A. Lang (SHS Miscellany, ii, 1904) 145; *Salutem in Christo* (1572) appeared under the initials R.G.

² *Salutem in Christo* 1572 (STC 17565). This short pamphlet was anonymous but there is every reason to attribute it to William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley. See S. Alford, *Burghley* (Cambridge, 2008), 177–80.

³ R. Keith, *An Historical Catalogue of the Scottish Bishops*, ed. M. Russell (Edinburgh, 1824), 117.

⁴ *Collections relating to the History of Mary Queen of Scots*, ed. J. Anderson, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1727), vol. i, p. iii. [hereafter referred to as Lesley’s *Account*].

the court of Elizabeth. But it was completed in the tower of London, where he claimed he lived in daily fear of the executioner's axe and it was intended for the eyes of the English Council in whose hands lay his life and his only hope of liberty. It is not surprising that it presented or invented Protestant credentials of which there is no evidence elsewhere – except in the letters and memoirs of English envoys whom Lesley had encountered at Mary's court.⁵ The second *Life*, though in the third person, is clearly based on material supplied by Lesley himself and was circulated by him to potential patrons throughout western Europe. Written when its author was persona non grata in England and in Scotland, it was in effect the curriculum vitae of an impoverished prelate in search of a Catholic bishopric on the continent.⁶ His attempts to be all things to all men did in both cases achieve their immediate object but they create problems for historians. Often the question is not whether Lesley was telling "the truth" but why he was concealing it – and why he frequently contradicted his own most emphatic assertions. I propose to examine the relationship between his life and works, and between his two very different histories.

Lesley himself opens his first *Account* with the proud claim to be descended of the nobility and ancient earls and barons of the family of Lesley, born of creditable and honourable parents; his father, Gavin, was parson of Kingussie. He makes no reference to the illegitimacy which made necessary the dispensation, in due course, "to John Lesley, notwithstanding the defect of his birth", to enable him to hold a benefice, or to the further dispensation when he was confirmed as Bishop of Coutances on 1 December 1591. Illegitimacy was by no means unusual in early sixteenth-century clergy. Lesley himself had three illegitimate daughters although they may have been born before he took holy orders in 1558. Before that, he had studied in the universities of Poitiers, Toulouse and Paris and when he returned to Scotland in 1554 he was appointed teacher of Civil and Canon law, Official of Aberdeen and

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. iii, 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. iii, p. vii-xx [hereafter referred to as the *Life*].

parson of Oyne. He claims that he would have been most contented to live in that calling all my life, "compounding differences between parties proceeding either of deadly feuds or other debates of lands or goods which is the right office of a judge". Remarkably, his first account of his life makes no mention of the coming of the Reformation (though he deals with that in varying depth in his *Histories of Scotland* later). His Latin History *De Origine*, written with potential Catholic patrons in mind, credits him with saving the Kirk of Aberdeen from destruction by the fervour of his preaching. But this account is demonstrably so partisan that it is a highly unreliable source for his life, as distinct from his character.

His role in Mary's service seems to have been first as a diplomat, later as a member of the Court of Session and trusted advisor. He was certainly sent to France to attend Mary's homecoming but failed in his mission to ally her with her Catholic subjects rather than with her Protestant half-brother. That mission had little chance of success but after Moray's alienation during what has been called Mary's Catholic interlude there are independent witnesses to the influence which Lesley came to exert. On 19 September 1565 Randolph, who detested him, wrote to Cecil that Lesley with David Chalmer was "no small doer with this queen" and in June 1566 the English envoy Killegrew was writing to Cecil that the bishop of Ross managed all affairs of state.⁷ He was already judge in the Court of Session by 1564 and on 18 October 1565 he was present at his first session of the Privy Council; he attended almost every Privy Council meeting between April 1566 and May 1567.⁸ His role in the Court of Session is problematic: he himself claimed that he was made its President. But of that claim there is no trace at all in the records. That can hardly be a case of "old men forget" and Lesley's role in the College of Justice appears to be remembered with advantages when he asserts that "he was deprived of his office of

⁷ *CSP Scot.*, ii, 1563-9, nos. 261 and 400.

⁸ *RPC*, i, 380; 447-511.

chief president which he had long discharged, because he refused to profess the Calvinian heresy".⁹

Ecclesiastical revenues if not power did come his way, as Commendator of Lindores, and, from 1566, as Bishop of Ross.¹⁰ After Mary was put in Loch Leven Castle and forced to abdicate Lesley withdrew "to his own country", probably to Rosemarkie, and, in the account of his life written in the Tower he later claims: "I did privately employ my time in contemplation and study but on her escape the Queen sent for me to be employed in her service as I was wont". The less trustworthy *Life*, written in the third person but undoubtedly with Lesley's full approval, is more effusive: "When queen Mary was detained in England she sent for Bishop Lesley who was then residing in his church and see of Ross to come forthwith to England in order to defend her honour and to procure her liberty, as if she grounded all her hopes upon his vigilance, faithful concerns and vigorous endeavours".¹¹

Those hopes were not fulfilled. Lesley's task in 1568 was threefold: first to defend the character of Mary and to counter a flood of propaganda which had poured from presses in Scotland and was gaining currency in England; second to expose the fiction that she had abdicated of her own free will, and third to appeal to Elizabeth to intervene and compel the Scots rebels to restore their queen, while brokering conditions which would be acceptable to them, for example that Mary would pardon past rebels provided they returned to their allegiance. It is doubtful if this project had any hope of success, in view of Cecil's conviction that, as Nicholas Throckmorton assured him, "the general design of the Catholic powers is to exterminate all nations dissenting with them in religion"; the best way for England was that the Queen of

⁹ M. J. Beckett, "The Political Works of John Lesley" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2002), 21-2.

¹⁰ He obtained formal provision to the bishopric of Ross from the Pope only in 1575, after he had been deprived of "the income and profits thereof" which he claimed in the *Life* he had enjoyed "so long as it was safe for him to stay in Scotland".

¹¹ *Life*, x. This is the only reference to Lesley ever living in Ross.

Scots should remain deprived of her crown. Elizabeth was more ambivalent; no Queen of England could be happy to allow a precedent for the deposition of a monarch of a neighbouring state.¹²

The tribunals at York and Westminster settled nothing. Lesley was to some extent disarmed by Elizabeth telling him that “though I was not of that religion which she professed she loved me not the worse for that cause so that I would continue to be a good and diligent servant to my mistress”.¹³ He was probably the only commissioner at York to write an account of the proceedings there against Mary and to incorporate them into his later printed books.¹⁴ For five years Lesley concentrated on a campaign to make Mary’s plight known to all Europe and tried to influence events by letters, despatches, polemic and, eventually, plotting. In these years all his writings were either precipitated by the events of 1568-72 or profoundly influenced by the conditions in which they were produced.¹⁵ But they touch on far broader issues than the personal fate of one individual: they include the right of resistance or the duty of non-resistance, the relationship between England and Scotland and the right of women to rule – the title of one of his books. He also supported though he did not originate Lethington’s proposal that Mary should marry the Duke of Norfolk. Elizabeth would have the assurance of Norfolk’s loyalty, and Norfolk’s power and influence should guarantee stability which neither Darnley nor Bothwell had been able to ensure. But any hope of convincing Elizabeth of his good intentions vanished when Norfolk concealed the whole project from her before being ignominiously exposed by Moray. From 1571 Lesley seems to have tried to secure not merely Elizabeth’s recognition of Mary as her successor, but her overthrow. Certainly either his integrity or his judgment must be compromised by the following statement in the *Life* (not published till he was beyond the reach of the English

¹² Alford, *Burghley*, 151-2.

¹³ *The Account*, 26.

¹⁴ Alford, *The early Elizabethan polity* (Cambridge, 1998), 172.

¹⁵ David McNaught Lockie, “The Political career of the Bishop of Ross 1568-80”, *HJUB*, iv, 98-137.

councillors to whom he had presented a very different account of his activities).

He helped the Ambassadors of France and Spain with his interest which was very considerable among the English nobility, especially such as were Catholics, having for near three years worked both night and day with great pains and vigilance; upon which the Catholics took up arms in hopes of the assistance of those princes which they had been promised by the Ambassadors, but for want of supplies, ammunition and money, the sinews of war, all their endeavours for propagating the Catholic religion at that time became vain and fruitless.¹⁶

But there is no evidence that Lesley had any part in the outbreak of the Northern Rebellion of 1569, however adroitly he later tried to turn it to his advantage. Even after the papal Bull of 1570 Lesley advised the earl of Southampton to continue to obey the Queen "as long as she is the strongest party". And he developed his ideas on non-resistance in a little known tract in the Codrington library of All Souls Oxford, described as "an excellent piece against resistance by the Bishop of Ross dated 4 march 1570".¹⁷ Until 1571 his aim was to reverse Mary's overthrow in Scotland rather than to bring about that of Elizabeth in England.

He was imprisoned at Burton early in 1569 apparently on information from his arch-enemy Moray but released without prejudicing his relations with Cecil and Mildmay: when they met with Mary at Chatsworth he had high hopes of the results of their negotiations. In fact his confinement gave him the leisure to work on his first, vernacular History of Scotland for Queen Mary and to revise two polemical books which he had written in support of Mary's cause; for the latter he had taken the precaution of obtaining the approval of Elizabeth and her Council. The following year he was confined for four months in the house of the bishop of London, Grindal, who judging by his plea to

¹⁶ *Life*, p. x.

¹⁷ All Souls, MS cc II fos. 123-4.

Cecil, seems to have found the experience more irksome than Lesley: "none of them are reformed that are sent to us and by receiving them the punishment lighteth upon us".¹⁸ It seems that the confinement was more of a punishment for the host than for Lesley himself who contentedly immersed himself in the English records which were easily accessible, most notably Polydore Virgil.

By 1571 all pretence of negotiation was abandoned, though Mary insisted that Lesley should remain in England. The catalyst was the downfall of Norfolk who in 1571 was shown to have broken a solemn undertaking "to meddle no further with that business of the marriage to Mary". Lesley's rooms were searched and he, suffering his second fit of the ague in a fortnight, was interrogated by Cecil, Mildmay and other members of the Council, and was deprived of all his papers and in effect of his functions as ambassador. This time he was entrusted to the bishop of Ely in Holborn where he had the opportunity to read books by English chroniclers and by Peter Martyr, Bullinger, and other reformers urged on him by his host, who shared his low opinion of Knox and Goodman.

But the tone soon changed. In October he was confronted with very public charges as "chief author of all rebellion and sedition in this land, and false traitor Scot". The charge of treason Lesley would not countenance for a moment; all he had done had been for the sake of the quietness of both realms; he was no traitor to the Queen of England but a Scotsman, faithful and true to his own prince.¹⁹ He also argued that he was entitled to immunity as an ambassador – a point which he reiterated at great length and with massive use of precedents when he wrote a dazzling though sycophantic piece of rhetoric pleading for his release. The book, *Pro libertate impetranda oratio*, has never until now been translated but is to be part of a new edition of Nichols' *Progresses of Queen Elizabeth* to be published shortly. Under pressure, and probably

¹⁸ Grindal to Cecil, Feb. 1569/70, in H. Ellis (ed.), *Original Letters*, iii (London, 1847), 365-6.

¹⁹ The conviction that as a Scot he was no traitor to England is consistent with the view that permeates his *Histories* of the relationship between England and Scotland.

threatened with the torture already used against his servants, he revealed all he knew; having been convinced that his gaolers were already in possession of all the information he gave them, and that his evidence would not be used against any man. There is no doubt that fear induced the bishop to make admissions with which he was to reproach himself for the rest of his life and to which there are oblique references in his later devotional works. Elizabeth treated him with surprising clemency "she understood he was acting at the behest of others and so should not be blamed".

Mary's reaction on receiving the account of his examination was also remarkably restrained, especially since it attributed to Lesley, on the word of one of his least scrupulous interrogators, Wilson, the astounding assertion that she had poisoned her first husband, connived at the death of her second and planned to dispose of her third. Shrewsbury her custodian, reported that on receiving Lesley's own humiliating account of his revelations she commented only "a flayed priest, a fearful priest", then adding: "yet another hath led his pen and were the cause of the writing thereof". But, according to Lesley, the Council would never allow him to see her reply to him. If Mary had believed that the bishop, who, as he maintained in almost all his books, had for years been her staunchest if not her wisest supporter, to be guilty of such an abject betrayal, she would hardly have continued to show personal regard for him. But what he had admitted was incriminating enough and it haunted the bishop for the rest of his life, as did memories of his continued incarceration in the Tower.

There is no evidence to support his allegation that "notwithstanding his privilege as an ambassador he was condemned to death contrary to the law of nations, for a whole year expecting daily to suffer a violent death by the hands of the public executioner, with many other Catholic noblemen who were beheaded".²⁰ He grumbled bitterly that he was deprived of paper, ink and even of light – yet his correspondence in the English state papers included confident orders for partridge, pheasant,

²⁰ *Life*, xi.

turkey and other delicacies and when he was released from the Tower his complaints show that he had not been deprived of all creature comforts: "the lord lieutenant kept my linen, silver plate and all other necessities". But for a man of his inquisitive temperament isolation was hardship enough "so close and straitly kept that I could have no manner of knowledge of what was done in the world, further than the four corners of my own prison and could have no kind of release ... and could never speak with one of the Council thereafter".

To judge by his later work he seems to have been permanently affected by what J.H. Burns called "the immense and sinister uncertainties which surrounded Elizabethan political prisoners".²¹ The introduction to his account written in the Tower puts heavy emphasis on "the weary peregrinations of this life in which we are as it were exiled from God and live in misery ... full of pain and travail, anxieties, terror, miseries that rather it is to be called a daily dying than life, being subject to so many evils".²² His experiences were put to more constructive use in two devotional and personal works for Mary's benefit "I did mark in my reading certain passages of the scriptures to serve my own turn for my comfort. And because I understand the Queen my mistress to be vexed with the like disease [melancholy] which cannot be so well cured as by such like godly and wholesome medicine I have thought it my duty to write to her in this kind". The manuscripts which he wrote for her in his own hand can be found, bound in white leather with Mary's coat of arms, in Lambeth Palace Library.²³ Her response was to send Lesley French verses of her own composition prompted by her meditations on his reflections. In August 1572, thanks to the intercession and money of the French ambassador, he was entrusted to the custody of the Bishop of Winchester who was soon pleading, like Grindal before him, for

²¹ J.H. Burns, "Catholicism in Defeat", *History Today*, xvi (1966), 793.

²² *Account*, Preface, p. iii.

²³ Lambeth Palace Library MSS 556, "Piae afflicti Animi Consolationes, divinaeque remedia" followed by "Tranquillitatis animi praeservatio et munimentum". These "Libri duo" are timeless meditations reflecting Christian stoicism in the tradition of the "Tower psalmists".

delivery "from such a devilish sprite as my house is possessed withal".²⁴ But he was not relieved of the troublesome sprite for another 15 months. The *Account* of these years in England gives an unequalled insight into the workings of Lesley's mind and the tensions and constraints within which he had to operate. And although he did not secure Mary's restoration it is probable that the mission with which he had been charged was beyond the powers of any diplomat given the enduring dominance of Cecil and his conviction that for the safety of the state Mary should stay in England. Eventually Lesley's entreaties in the *oratio* to Elizabeth bore fruit and he was released at the end of 1573.

The sources for the next twenty-two years are patchy. He certainly rode to Rome in 1575, with his loyal and outspoken friend Ninian Winzet, the Scots Catholic polemicist, in his retinue. He applied himself to the cause of restoring the so-called "Scots" monasteries in Franconia with vigour and success and ensured that Winzet should be appointed abbot of Regensburg or Ratisbon in an attempt to propagate the Catholic faith in the Empire.²⁵ At the same time he was completing his ambitious Latin *History*. He stayed in Vienna, and Prague where he "made some stay with the Emperor" and he sought support for attempts to engineer Catholic invasions of Scotland in order to restore Mary by force. These came to nothing and his attempts to secure a bishopric for himself in France were no more successful; an exasperated French cleric observed that "the Bishop of Ross never hears of a benefice being vacant but he asks for it for himself". In 1579 he was appointed suffragan of Rouen and in December 1592 he was translated, on paper, to the bishopric of Coutances; it was only then that he was released from the bond which bound him to the see of Ross. But he never returned to Scotland where in all he had spent just over half his life.

²⁴ Ellis (ed.), *Original Letters*, iii, 367.

²⁵ M. Dilworth, *The Scots in Franconia* (Edinburgh, 1974). 15-18. explains the confusion which resulted when the Irish monks of Ratisbon called themselves, and were called, *Scoti* in their legal documents "though all their links were with Ireland". Lesley had his own reasons to emphasize a Scottish connection which he must have known was, by 1578, spurious.

Those were turbulent times in Coutances. Denied entry by the canons of the cathedral there, he withdrew to Brussels in the Spanish Netherlands. Later authorities, almost without exception, claim that he died and was buried in an Augustinian monastery “about two miles from Brussels”; strangely, it seems that no such Augustinian monastery ever existed there.

Writings

His first three books share a common purpose: to strengthen Mary’s position and prospects. The first, *The defence of the honour of ... the Princesse Marie Queene of Scotland*, was intended to rehabilitate Mary’s reputation in the eyes of those with the resources to re-establish her on her throne. The *Treatise touching the Right, Title and Interest to the succession to the Croune of England* tried to establish that her claim to the English succession, should Elizabeth die without issue, was better than that of any rival. The third countered the widespread view that women were by their nature unfit to rule. In 1569 all three “books” appeared in a composite volume, though different sections were clearly printed on different presses. In whole or in part this compilation was to appear, with small but significant modifications in three subsequent editions in English, and between 1580 and 1586 in Latin, French and Spanish.

The *Defence of the Honour* was the book Lesley was uniquely qualified to write. He had known Mary throughout her reign and had witnessed many of its most dramatic events. He was certainly appalled at the stream of propaganda which had been released against Mary in both England and Scotland – in marked contrast to the eulogies which had been composed in her honour only three years earlier, before Darnley’s death.²⁶ Some of the accusations against her were based on no firmer foundations than those put forward by Mohamed Al Fayed today. One popular song “to be sung to the tune of black and yellow”

²⁶ Examples can be found in *Satirical poems at the time of the Reformation*, ed. J. Cranstoun (Edinburgh, Scottish Text Society, 1891-93) and in J.E. Phillips, *Images of a Queen* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), 34-7.

asserts that Darnley “discreet and sage ruled Scotland vertuously” until he was hanged from a pear-tree by two disaffected nobles, with the approval of a third. Bills or posters which mysteriously appeared in Edinburgh portrayed Mary as a mermaid [code for prostitute]. More alarmingly, even street ballads were asserting that subjects had the right to depose their king – or queen. But perhaps the most dangerous were the charges put forward by George Buchanan in *De Maria Regina Scotorum*. He, like Lesley, had been sent to York, but by Moray, to argue the case not for Mary but against her. An antidote to this venom was imperative – and no serious effort had been made to provide one, as Alexander Wilkinson has shown, even in France, perhaps because its rulers had no wish to alienate Elizabeth.²⁷ All this was against the background of Alba’s Council of Blood and other atrocities perpetrated by Catholics upon Protestants in Flanders which had caused the English diplomat Throckmorton to conclude (in 1568) that “the general design of the catholic powers is to exterminate all nations dissenting with them in religion”.

How effective was Lesley’s intervention? Trained in the law as he was, he probably made as good a case as anyone could for Mary’s innocence, based partly on his knowledge of her character and partly on his use of the evidence available. At times he overstated his case – but so, undoubtedly, did Buchanan.²⁸ And that case became the basis for much later pro-marian writing. Until 1569 nothing had been written in defence of Mary. By the end of that year Cecil was lamenting that “by the universal opinion of the world the Queen Mary’s case was just” and, worse, she had the support of “the strongest monarchs of Christendom”. And this had been achieved without alienating Elizabeth to whom Lesley referred in most flattering terms in his Preface as the natural ally and saviour of his own Queen who revered her cousin as if she were her daughter. Even so, Lesley had had taken the precaution of publishing

²⁷ A. Wilkinson, “Mary Queen of Scots in the polemical literature of the French Wars of Religion” (Ph.D. thesis, University of St Andrews, 2001).

²⁸ See W. A. Gatherer (ed.), *The Tyrannous Reign of Mary Stewart by George Buchanan* (Edinburgh, 1958).

the book anonymously under a false imprint²⁹ and having the contents revised by an English friend who put into English any Scots words in it. It was not until he was safely in France, ten years later, that he acknowledged authorship.

The second edition, of 1571, appeared over the name of Morgan Philips who was, conveniently, dead. This time there was much greater reason for caution: Lesley knew he was suspected of having precipitated the Rebellion of the Northern Earls, and having supported the proposal that Mary should marry Norfolk. The text is substantially the same but all favourable references to Elizabeth have been removed and the impression is fostered that the interests of Elizabeth and her nobility could diverge. Why the change of tone? By 1571 Lesley had decided that little could be hoped for from Elizabeth. He was trying to convince the world and the Scots nobles in particular that those who defied God and their lawful monarch must expect retribution in this world as well as in the next. In the preface to the second edition implied threats become explicit with prophecies of "intolerable bluddy ruin ... when the head, bodie and members shall be lamentably severed to the confusion and subversion of the whole body politike" with particular reference to England. It is not surprising that this edition "gave more offence" in London than had the first.

The Right, Title and Interest to the Succession

This the second book was more widely read than any of his other works. There are still more manuscript copies of it in British Libraries than there are of all the rest of his books put together, and printed copies can be found in the most improbable little town libraries in France. And this despite the fact that of all Lesley's works it was the one Cecil was most anxious to suppress. When he learnt in 1580 that yet another edition was forthcoming he drew up a list of points to be made in answer to the Bishop of Ross's book – and engaged for the purpose the Somerset Herald of the day, Robert Glover, whose mastery of genealogy was

²⁹ It purports to be "printed in London ... by Eusebius Dicaeophile, 1569".

unrivalled. Although Glover's answer was never printed at least three manuscript copies survive. One, wrongly catalogued in the Northampton Record Office, is of particular interest since it is carefully annotated by Sir Walter Mildmay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the day.³⁰ There could hardly be clearer proof of the importance attached to Lesley's work. Glover's diatribe is perhaps chiefly memorable for demonstrating that Lesley was not the only polemicist of the period to misrepresent his opponents or to have mastered the art of spin. His position is unequivocal; "that most ungrateful bishop of ross ... a ringleader of all unquiet minds ... most openly hath proved himself a capital enemy to our queen and quietness ...". Fortunately for Lesley, he was by then safely in France.

The arguments are highly technical, for example that Mary had not been disqualified from the English succession by the terms of the will of Henry VIII, and many are essentially genealogical. But it takes no specialist knowledge to expose weaknesses in those which are not: for example that although Mary had not been born in England her birth place, Linlithgow, was "very near to England". Later, he attempts to blur the distinction between English and Scots. "The Scots and we [he is writing in the character of an Englishman] be all Christians of one island, of one tongue, and almost of the same fashions and manners, customs and laws". Only one who knew far less of Scots laws than did Lesley would believe them to be "almost one" with those of England. As regards language, he had better reason than most to appreciate that Scots and English did not fully share one tongue; although he was one of the best educated Scots of his day he judged it advisable to submit this very book, and others, for revision by a native English speaker, Dr Goode, "that he might turn into English any Scots words in it". A lawyer by training, his concern was always to select such evidence as will best advance his case. His approach was, as ever, pragmatic. It cannot be said that Lesley fulfilled his promise to convince "indifferent" or impartial men that Mary's claim to the English Crown "is as open

³⁰ Northampton MS Fitzwilliam (Milton) Pol.223.

and clear as the bright sun". But his arguments were at least sufficiently impressive to encourage Spain to offer help to attempts, however ill-prepared, to establish Mary's claims by force. These attempts in the late 1570s came to nothing but his views on monarchy may have been more enduring. Arguably, in upholding the concept of "absolute power" the book could be claimed to have played some part in shaping the ideas of the apologists of the early Stuart monarchy in England and especially of James VI and I to whom, with his mother, the most polished English edition, of 1584, was dedicated.

Women's Right to Rule

Of all Lesley's works this has in some ways the most resonances for us to-day. For obvious reasons it has been quoted more often in general or social histories of the last twenty-five years than it was in the previous four centuries. Here again Lesley was trying to counter a prevalent view which could seriously weaken Mary's claim to the throne of England. Even if he had demonstrated that she had the character and attributes of an acceptable ruler, and was in no way disqualified by statute or genealogy, that claim could still be challenged on the grounds, often assumed in past centuries and argued with unique vehemence in the past decade, that women were, by their sex, disqualified to rule. "Men have expressly denied and refused all womanly government ... [avouching] also that the civil regiment of women is repugnant both to the law of nature and to the law of God".³¹

The First Blast, published in 1558,³² had been directed against Mary Tudor. But it contained arguments capable of a far wider application. It was already well known in the courts of female rulers in the early 1560s and Lesley may well have calculated that a defence of female succession could do his future prospects at the court of any one of them nothing but good; he had already crossed swords with Knox in doctrinal disputation on the mass after which each, characteristically,

³¹ Lesley, *The Defence of the Honour* (1569), p. ii r.

³² John Knox: *On rebellion*, ed. R.A. Mason (Cambridge, 1994), 128-9.

claimed to have routed the other. But denunciations of female rule had been current for many centuries and for Calvinists such as Knox they had been given a new impetus by familiarity with the Bible from which could be quarried material to support either side. There were classical precedents yet in the past century they had received little but condemnation. Sir John Fortescue in 1475 stated categorically that no woman ought to reign upon men. Calvin in a letter to Cecil in 1559 implies that female rule was an aberration: "Government by women was a deviation from the original and proper order of nature, to be ranked, no less than slavery, amongst the punishments consequent upon the fall of man".³³ It is only fair to note that he added elsewhere "if a woman has inherited the throne it would not be lawful to unsettle governments which are ordained by the peculiar providence of God". Belief in the inferiority of women's intellect was not confined to protestants: Vives, a Spanish humanist at the court of Henry VIII, wrote a guide for Mary Tudor: "women should have no part in public life. They should not meddle with matters of realm or cities your own house is a city great enough for you".³⁴ In 1569 there was certainly a case to answer.

John Aylmer had made a half-hearted attempt at a reply, observing that some women were better learned, more discreet than men, but he then described at far greater length women who were "feeble, careless, wavering, witless, rash talebearers, triflers, without counsel". However, Aylmer added "it is not so dangerous a matter to have a woman ruler as men take it to be. For it is not she that ruleth but the laws, the executors of which are her judges, her justices of the peace and other such officers".³⁵ It goes without saying that Elizabeth's view of the matter was very different: when dismissing a particularly obstreperous house of Commons she reminded them "you can do nothing without my force and authority". But to Lesley, attempting to defend the interests of one

³³ Calvin to Cecil, *Zurich Letters*, ii, no. 15.

³⁴ Trans. R. Hyde, *A very fruitful and Pleasante Boke called the instruction of a Christen Woman* (London, 1541), fo. 136.

³⁵ J. Aylmer, *An harborowe ...* (Strasburg, 1559), G3v.

queen, while if possible ingratiating himself with another, a robust defence of female rule was more appropriate than damage limitation.

The comparison with Knox is more stark: while Knox relied primarily on revelation, "I am assured that god hath revealed that it is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire over us", Lesley, a civil and canon lawyer by training, asserts that nothing can be found among the acts of parliament or in civil or canon law, or in the customs or the historical records of England which could justify the judgments of "this sober man" whose case depended solely on the scriptures as interpreted by those described ironically as "such quiet and sober spirits as himself". The difference between them of course went deeper: Lesley claimed that Christ's teaching does not subvert civil polity not repugnant to his expressed word, whereas Knox insisted no law could stand unless it was fully in accordance with God's will as revealed in the Scriptures. To Lesley the criteria were precedent and practical experience; to Knox "nothing could make that lawful which God by his word had manifestly condemned even if it were approved by all men and all laws and all man-made law" ... "if any men be afraid to violate the oath of obedience which they have made to such monsters, let them be most assuredly persuaded that as the beginning of their oaths, proceeding from ignorance, was sin, so is the obstinate purpose to keep the same nothing but plain rebellion against God".³⁶ This view was anathema to Lesley, before 1570.

More positively, Lesley asked rhetorically "what thing is there of reason, wit and understanding that woman hath not, or may not, achieve and attain?" In the first edition, though not the second, he cites "with the first and best the Qucen [Elizabeth's] noble majesty with her wit, policy, prudence, liberality, justice, mercy among her other princely qualities". However self-serving Lesley's original motivation, he breaks free from the conventional attitudes of most of his contemporaries. He at least constructed a far more generous view of the potential of women

³⁶ Knox, *On Rebellion*, 44.

than had hitherto been published in England. And he influenced David Chalmer, or Chamber, to take it further in 1579.

Lesley's two *Histories*, like his *Lives*, were written for different purposes in changing circumstances. His first, in Scots and dealing only with the years 1436-1561, was primarily for the diversion and instruction of his Queen, like whom he was, at the time (1569-70) in custody. Unable to check his sources, he had no intention of publishing it "until it be more diligently corrected". It was not published until 1830.³⁷ His Latin History, modelled on Livy and published at Rome in 1578, has a significantly different purpose and is on an altogether grander scale. Only the last three out of ten books deal with the period after 1436 while Books 1-7 treat of the memorable deeds of the ancient Scots and their origin, manners and history.³⁸ For it, Lesley makes no apology but claims it has been drawn up with all the exactness which the truth of history requires. Lavishly bound, it is dedicated to the Pope and to Cardinal Caetano, both potential patrons of Lesley's own career and of his projected invasion of Scotland through Thomas Stukeley.³⁹ Many copies, very unusually for the period, have a recognizable though inaccurate map of Scotland. Again, the date and place of publication are crucial to its content and its tone. In Rome Lesley was free from all fear of English reprisals and could present the Scots as the most orthodox of Christian nations "most obedient sons to the pope of Rome" and, significantly, worth helping in an endeavour to restore their Catholic Queen; his second History was an attempt not only to describe the past but also to use it to shape the future.

It might be hoped that Lesley who by 1558 was a senior official in the Church might provide unique insights into the Reformation of which he was not only an eye-witness but also the first Catholic chronicler.

³⁷ J. Lesley, *The Historie of Scotland from the death of James I in the year 1436 ... to the year 1561*, ed. T. Thomson, (Bannatyne Club, 38, Edinburgh. 1830).

³⁸ *De Origine, moribus et rebus gestis scotorum, libri decem* (Rome, 1578), translated as *The Historie of Scotland written first in Latin* 2 vols. edd. E.G. Cody & W. Murison (Edinburgh, 1888 and 1895).

³⁹ Details of this ill-fated project are given in Lockie.

But, in his Scots *Historie* of 1570, he declared himself content simply "to rehearse the thing as it was done adding no odious judgements of my own but leaving the reader to judge as he thinks good". From the limited material he provides the reader could only conclude that the fall of the Catholic Church had less to do with any shortcomings in the hierarchy than with the greed and ambition of those excluded from it. He does provide an account of events from the death of James I till Mary's return from France; he describes the progress of the Reformation, notably in Fife, in some detail, but he makes no attempt to explain its causes, beyond condemning the practice of diverting church revenues to the extended royal family, and the granting of commendations "whereof much evil did increase". Characteristically he ignores the fact that he himself had been made commendator of Lindores only three years earlier. Implicitly, he concedes that there was widespread ignorance among the clergy when he states that a great number of abbots, deans and beneficed men, incapable of preaching and threatened with losing their livings in a reformed Catholic Church, aligned themselves with those who sought its overthrow.

In 1578 the Latin History, though far from impartial, provides a far more rounded picture. He sheds some light on the alienation of many Scots from Mary of Guise, for whom he shows warm personal regard, and from the French, Catholic, interest when he states in passing that "utterly neglecting the Scots nobility, she admitted only Frenchmen to her secret council, with very few Scots".⁴⁰ In 1570 he had merely stated that decisions attributed to D'Oysel and de Roubay "caused murmur" and that letters were sent to Germany; the Latin version gives them a more specific purpose: "to bring in the Calvinist ministers whom they knew to be seditious persons and perfytt in the perversion of religion". More importantly, by 1578 Lesley has given more thought to the question he never appears to have addressed in 1570 but to which he returns in one of the longest additions inserted into his earlier text:

⁴⁰ Cody, 583.

But you ask how came such a shocking state of religion, such a hasty overthrow ... not truly because the ecclesiastical estate had broken their faith or neglected their office but because they had not extinguished in the beginning the sparks of heresy, which they should have done with teaching, writing, reproving Winking at many things they brought to the state itself great damage and harm, and last, which almost was the fountain of all mischief, they had neglected the people so that they were as bairns utterly untaught in the catechism, totally uninstructed in what they might surely believe ... to this was added the life of many churchmen apparently stained with avarice and worldly pleasure.⁴¹

It was probably through the influence of Ninian Winzet that Lesley became a more assertive apologist for the Catholic Church than hitherto. This was achieved by the addition of pejorative keywords and sometimes by the addition of three or four paragraphs to his earlier account. He never examines the doctrinal issues in any depth, but he is, in the Latin History, aware of their existence. And his attacks on specific heresies current long before his own lifetime show more vehemence than accuracy: for example the teachings of the Hussite Paul Craw were not those attributed to him by Lesley. The burning of Patrick Hamilton is for the first time related to doctrinal issues as it had not been in 1570, though with only a brief reference to “justification, predestination, freewill and such poison utterly discordant with catholic purity”. In 1578 Lesley creates an image of “a nation dragged headlong into mischief by a fellow neither cultured nor learned not endowed with natural or acquired gifts ... whose pestilent tongue ran on foolishly without the rules of art”. Curiously, here he seems more critical of the style than the content of Knox’s polemic. There is no more attempt at objectivity here than there is in Buchanan but for the first time Lesley, whose talents and training had equipped him for an administrative rather than a pastoral role, is trying to reclaim some of those who had

⁴¹ Cody, ii, 425-6; *De Origine*, 583.

been led astray – either by trying to inspire Scots Catholics to follow in the steps of their orthodox forebears or by reviving colleges founded in his version by Scots, where the true faith could be taught.

It cannot be claimed that Lesley's *Histories* advanced the resistance debate which was engaging some of the keenest minds in Europe. But he would certainly not have considered that the commodity of the common weal allowed him to do so; for him, the right to defy duly constituted authority did not exist. Lesley is not always consistent but his books include nothing which could give aid or comfort to rebels. The lesson he draws from recorded history is always that "rebellion brings harm to the doer thereof". This contention was developed most cogently in his unpublished piece against deposition and rebellion, now in *All Souls*, Oxford. In about 1000 words this treatise encapsulates all the arguments against resistance which appear at different points in Lesley's books. He sweeps aside the Calvinist claim that magistrates had a disabling authority by virtue of their office: "their subjects be private men, neither ought [they] in any cause whatsoever rise against their princes to displace them". This could be regarded as a palpable hit at John Mair and certainly at George Buchanan. "The teaching of religion" is presented as unequivocal. Support is found in I Samuel "whereby the right of a king is constituted there is no liberty at all granted to any subject to resist". The duty of obedience is asserted without qualification: "God would that the Jews should obey even Nebuchadnezzar who possessed the kingdom wrongfully, oppressing them with great violence and tyranny." Jeremiah went further, exhorting the people to pray for the health of the king of Babylon and Balthazar his son. Lesley's message is clear:

we are not only restrained from taking up arms against princes but are earnestly admonished to pray for their good health and long life. Yea, although they be the most terrible tyrants.

Even Nero should be obeyed not only for fear of vengeance but for conscience sake. Patristic sources are cited: "we say with St Ambrose

‘let our weapons be prayers and tears’”. It is ironic that within weeks of writing these words Lesley, perhaps in response to the papal Bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, was by his actions undermining them; specifically, he was doing all in his power to overthrow the queen – Elizabeth – to whose court he was still accredited. Once again, the precepts of this highly gifted cleric are at odds with his political practice.

St Andrews